

Transylvania County Natural Area Inventory

TOXAWAY RIVER GORGE Significant Natural Heritage Area

Site Significance: National

Quadrangles: Eastatoe Gap and Reid

Size: 9,541 acres

Ownership: Division of Parks and
Recreation (Gorges State Park) and private

SIGNIFICANT FEATURES: This easternmost of the five escarpment gorges is home to 12 species of rare vascular plants and 13 species of bryophytes and lichens. Among these are perhaps the world's greatest concentrations of the southern variety of Oconee bells (*Shortia galacifolia* var. *galacifolia*), extensive populations of large witch-alder (*Fothergilla major*), and ash-leaf golden-banner (*Thermopsis fraxinifolia*). Several rare species are associated with the numerous Spray Cliff communities found in the waterfalls and bedrock-lined creeks of the site, including rock-fir clubmoss (*Huperzia porophila*), dwarf filmy-fern (*Trichomanes petersii*), one of two extant populations of single-sorus spleenwort (*Asplenium monanthes*) in the state, and a number of endemic and disjunct species of mosses and liverworts.

The diversity and condition of natural communities in the gorge is quite good and includes some natural communities that are rare outside of the gorges area, such as natural White Pine Forests. In addition, the Toxaway River Gorge supports unique associations of montane, Piedmont, and endemic plants seldom seen together. Several rare animal species are known from the Toxaway River Gorge, including populations of green salamanders (*Aneides aeneus*), a timber rattlesnake den (*Crotalus horridus*), eastern woodrats (*Neotoma floridana haematoreia*), and northern long-eared myotis (*Myotis septentrionalis*).

LANDSCAPE RELATIONSHIPS: This site encompasses the lower gorge of the Toxaway River and most of its tributaries in southwestern Transylvania County from US 64 downstream to the South Carolina line. The Horsepasture River Gorge is the next watershed to the west and is separated from the Toxaway River by a series of north-south oriented peaks and ridges. The site is bordered by medium to low density residential areas to the north and east. Several low mountains (Round Mountain, Frozen Mountain, and Nancy Mountain) that lie to the east outside of the site form the watershed boundary of the Savannah River drainage. The Toxaway River is the major feature of the site. It descends down Toxaway Falls at the head of the site from Lake Toxaway to the north. Significant tributaries to the Toxaway River in the site include Bearwallow Creek, Auger Fork, Maple Spring Branch, Toxaway Creek, and Rock Creek. The lower end of the Toxaway River is impounded by Lake Jocassee, which extends into South Carolina and eventually captures the waters of the other Transylvania County escarpment rivers.

SITE DESCRIPTION: The site is an extremely rugged landscape of narrow ravines, steep side slopes, and narrow to broad spur ridges. Many of the ridges in the site are south-facing and as such tend to be quite dry. The coves are relatively sheltered because of the depth of the ravines in which they lie. Exposed rock is common in areas of high relief and particularly along the side-slopes of ridges and the banks of the Toxaway River and its tributaries. Exposed rocky areas are